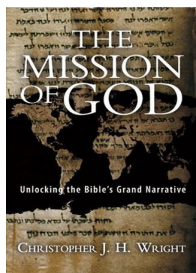


Book Reviews



Wright, Christopher J. H. *The mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's grand narrative*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006. 582 pages. \$30.00.

Christopher Wright is the director for international ministries for Langham Partnership International, known in the U.S. as John Stott Ministries. Most of the material in this book appeared in basic form in previous works such as *God's people in God's land: Family, land, and property in the Old Testament*; *Old Testament ethics for the people of God*; the trilogy, *Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament*; *Knowing the Holy Spirit through the Old Testament*; *Knowing God the Father through the Old Testament*; commentaries on Deuteronomy and Ezekiel; and *Salvation belongs to our God: Celebrating the Bible's central story*.

Just by looking at these titles it becomes obvious that Wright's interest and area of expertise is the Old Testament. *The mission of God* is no exception. The book is full of textual exegesis, and almost everything falls under God's mission, including ecology and AIDS. Unfortunately, previous works on mission theology in the Old Testament are barely mentioned.

In this work, Wright proposes that mission is the basis for the entire Bible instead of just one of the themes in it. His goal is to read the

Bible missiologically, with a missional hermeneutic. Although most of the book deals with the Old Testament, the author tries to preserve the big picture by making frequent reference to the New Testament. He admits he reads the Old Testament in the light of the New, "in submission to the One who claimed to be its ultimate focus and fulfillment" (18). The author is trying to recreate the biblical worldview by emphasizing the great themes of biblical theology rather than simply offering support for what mission practitioners are doing in the field.

Wright divides the book into four major sections starting with The Bible and Mission, followed by The God of Mission, The People of Mission, and The Arena of Mission. The Bible and Mission discusses the relationship between the concept of mission as is understood today and the Word of God. Wright decides to read the Bible missiologically and to understand the Bible in light of God's mission rather than finding support for Christian mission and creating a biblical theology of mission. The result is a combination of the two with an emphasis on creating a hermeneutic that will allow the mission of God to become the framework for reading the Scriptures. In his view, "mission is a major key that unlocks the whole grand narrative of the canon of Scripture" (17).

Analyzing the definitions of the terms related to mission, Wright proposes that the term *missional* gains precedence over *missiological* because the term *missionary* is associated with the colonial era. The whole Bible is considered a missional phenomenon,

being the “product of and the witness to the ultimate mission of God” (22). Human mission derives from the mission of God. Because of the centrifugal meaning associated with the word *missionary*, Wright prefers not to use it in association with the OT. This is the main presupposition of the book: “Israel was not mandated by God to send missionaries to the nations” (24). The term *missional* allows the reader to pour his/her own meaning into the word “missional” and to avoid the centrifugal aspect. Thus, Israel is no longer a missionary to the nations but has only a *missional* role. By substituting the term, Wright has managed to avoid looking for a missionary mandate for Israel to go to the nations.

When dealing with biblical hermeneutics, one has to check the assumptions and principles employed to approach the text. Unfortunately, Wright does not seem to pay much attention to his own assumptions. He assumes his reading of the New Testament is safe enough and satisfactory for understanding the Old Testament. However, the results do not seem to agree. There is always the danger of distorting the text by imposing a certain framework on it. In Anthony Billington’s words, “The question is more what sort of control the framework exercises over the text, and whether the text is ever allowed to critique the framework at any point” (26). Wright is quick to admit that “in searching the Scriptures for a biblical foundation for mission, we are likely to find what we brought with us—our own conception of mission, now festooned with biblical luggage tags” (37).

Wright believes that the Old Testament writers should be included in the “hermeneutic of coherence,” together with the New Testament authors. The only problem is the difference Wright makes between the

messianic reading (up to Christ) and the missional reading (from Christ on) that separates the Scriptures and creates two different hermeneutics. The unity of the Bible is affected.

The author assumes that Israel as God’s chosen people represents the instrument for mission. Since Israel manifested a visible centripetal tendency with negative connotations, should this be considered God’s plan for them? Although Wright admits that Israel existed for the sake of the nations, he believes that the nations were supposed to simply watch as spectators to what God did in and for Israel and to the way Israel responded. Israel understood its role as a passive one, expecting the nations to come to Jerusalem if interested.

What surprises is the frequency with which Wright, although looking for a missiological hermeneutic, finds almost none in the Old Testament. For example he cites Paul in Acts 13:47 (quoting Isa 49:6) identifying with the missiological hermeneutic of the Old Testament, but then adds “if ever there was one” (67). Such surprising statements reveal the author’s presuppositions behind the conclusions: there is no missional hermeneutic in the Old Testament, at least in the New Testament’s form.

The second section, *The God of Mission*, presents a God whose authority comes from his uniqueness. Israel’s monotheistic religion, based on this uniqueness, describes God as graceful and just both towards Israel and the nations. God is the author of mission and people just share in his mission. “Mission was not made for the church; the church was made for mission—God’s mission” (62). However, the author claims that YHWH intervenes in the life and fortunes of pagan nations and that he is able to do it without Israel’s help, thus justifying his centripetal view of mission

(85). Any "exception" (i.e., Isa 66:19) is dismissed as an eschatological expectation (90-92).

Monotheism is clearly linked to mission. Wright builds a strong case against the idols as being "nothing" compared with the real God, but he also stresses that worshipping such "nothings" robs the true God of his glory. Worship becomes the corollary of mission in both the Old and the New Testament. "So there is a close link between the monotheistic dynamic of Israel's faith and the glorious richness of Israel's worship. . . . And this, in a nutshell, is a missional perspective, even though there is no centrifugal missional mandate" (132). Wright's presuppositions against centrifugal mission surface again even when the topic does not call for such a qualification.

In the third section the author focuses on the people of mission. His view of such people is most interesting, starting only with Abraham. God's covenant with Abraham is for him "the single most important biblical tradition within a biblical theology of mission and a missional hermeneutic of the Bible." However, a careful reading of Genesis reveals that when it comes to God's mission in which humans take part, the covenant at the gates of Eden (Gen 3:15) stands out as pivotal. Wright describes the arch that covers the time span from Genesis 12 to Revelation 22. However, he misses a very important segment that is key to understanding mission in the rest of the Scriptures: Genesis 1-11.

God's mission to restore a sinful earth does not begin with Abraham. Paul speaks of the plan made before time. Noah already had a mission for the nations while Abraham's choice by God was clearly not an afterthought or a solution to the crisis of sin. Noah, Abraham, Israel, and the Church, are only chapters in God's mission. In

order to preserve Abraham's role as the beginner of mission, Wright suggests that Gen 10:31 which mentions languages indicates that the next chapter, 11:1, "is not chronologically sequential" (196, f6).

Wright's insistence on the gathering of the nations at Jerusalem seems to be based on a dispensationalist reading, and on the concept that at the end Jerusalem and the temple will be rebuilt and the nations will gather there. The limitations that he imposes on the reading of the Old Testament shape from the beginning the results of the study. "Our focus here is not on all texts that refer in any way to YHWH and the nations but on those that articulate some element of universality, either directly or implicitly echoing the Abraham promise" (223). Such limitations restrict God to only one method of dealing with the nations, blessing them through Israel. For Wright, Israel's story is not about deliverance but about blessing, and so he misses the importance of curses in Genesis and Deuteronomy.

The author seems to be impressed by the volume that Israel's history occupies in the Old Testament. However, Israel's story only proves what sinful humans can do to God's mission: distort it. The exegesis of some passages in the Psalms and Prophets reveals God's ideal for humanity, not only for Israel. Wright admits the psalmist talks about realized eschatology, not only the future one. What if it was not eschatology at all, but simply their present understanding? The identity of Israel is merged with that of Egypt and Assyria as in Isa 19:24-25 and they are described as a blessing on the earth, like Israel. Wright shows this is one of the missiologically most significant texts in the Old Testament and recognizes the inherent universality that is programmed into the genes of Israel (236). Ethnicity is not

the issue, because these nations are interrelated from Noah.

Although Wright recognizes the balance between particularity and universality in the Old Testament (as in Gen 12, or Exod 19), he does not see the same balance in the centrifugal-centripetal model. Abraham is seen as the only recipient of blessing, and the nations have to come to him if they want to be blessed. It is not difficult to see why the author places such an important role on ethics, and the value of it for today's mission. He quotes Deut 4:6-8 and Isa 51:4 showing that the nations are watching Israel, waiting for the "light" to shine on them.

In Wright's understanding, the Exodus is a model for God's redemption. However, he misses the initial perspective found at the beginning of Genesis if the Exodus becomes the "prime lens through which we see the biblical mission of God" (275). He also misses the centrifugal aspect of the Exodus. Wright emphasizes that for him, "the totality of God's redemption . . . includes all that God has done—from the exodus to the cross" (279). The question remains: Were there any redemptive acts before the exodus? If the Exodus is God's model of redemption, the jubilee is presented as God's model of restoration. Wright links land and covenant and declares that "divine judgment eventually meant expulsion from the land, until the restored relationship was symbolized in the return to the land" (292). He shows that the jubilee had two thrusts: release/liberty, and return/restoration (Lev 25:10).

The author is supporting the unity of the Testaments when asking why Christians think they are absolved of the Old Testament commands. The issue is vital and pointed. However, his answer lacks consistency. Wright declares now that the Old Testament type of mission is not cancelled by the

New Testament, but when addressing the clean/unclean food issue he states that Jesus "turned the clean-unclean distinction inside out. . . . He declared forgiveness to people on His own authority, completely bypassing the normal route for such benefit, namely, the official sacrificial cult at the temple" (310). For Wright the distinction between clean and unclean animals and food was only a symbol of the national distinction between Old Testament Israel and the nations.

God's covenant with Israel is presented as one of the core themes of Old Testament theology, and of Israel's self-understanding. The sequence of covenants offers the best way to read the Old Testament. "This grand narrative embodied Israel's coherent worldview, a worldview that included their own sense of election, identity and role in the midst of the nations" (325). However, Wright begins the chain of covenants with Noah ("the first explicit reference to covenant-making in the biblical text"), because of the universality in the Noachic covenant that includes humans and all Creation. Again, he misses the covenant in Gen 3:15, and believes that the Sinai covenant and God's covenant with David are practically the Abrahamic covenant adapted to new circumstances.

Wright considers the covenants in the Old Testament as eschatological and developing in a trajectory that "leads to the missionally charged language of fulfillment in the NT." He seems surprised that Jesus and Paul do not use the term "covenant" frequently, but he notices that they took it for granted "as the baseline for their thinking" (351). The author also believes that the story and worldview of Israel should be ours today. Because of this eschatological view, even the Noahic covenant is seen as "harnessed to the certainty of God's

promise of future blessing for his people." Concluding his study of the covenants, he finds that "the mission of God is as integral to the sequence of the covenants as they are to the overarching grand narrative of the whole Bible" (356).

God's main purpose, acknowledges Wright, is "the rolling back of the curse." He indicates that Lev 26 is full of echoes of the Genesis portrait of Creation. The Tabernacle in symbol covered God's presence with humans from the gates of the Garden to the gates of the New Jerusalem. At the same time, the sacrificial system and Levitical ritual reflect the fundamental missional orientation of Israel (and also of God).

Wright introduces ethics as people's response to God's challenge, "the mid-term between election and mission, as the purpose of the former and the basis for the latter." Election is supposed to produce a people committed to ethically reflect God's character. Election implies ethics, not as an end in itself but "a means to a greater end of the ingathering of the nations." The author's emphasis on ethics as mission is understandable in the light of his centripetal view of mission in the Old Testament. He reduces the mission of Israel "to live as God's people in God's land for God's glory" (394).

The last section of the book deals with the arena in which God's mission takes place. Wright focuses on the land received by Israel, and the responsibilities to take care of it, as a testimony for the surrounding nations. Care for the earth constitutes one aspect of mission needed today, and the author emphasizes that glory should be given to God by our attitude towards Creation. Creation was initially declared good, and God wants to redeem Creation, too. Anyone who loves God and wants to be obedient to

him will manifest care for the earth. Such attitudes also reflect our priestly and kingly role given at Creation.

The author analyzes the human being as reflected in the Scriptures, and why the good news has to be carried to all who share God's image, with no regard to ethnicity. "To be human is to have the capacity of being addressed by the living Creator God" (422). Wisdom has been given to all people, not only to Israel or the Church. As a bridge and a missionary tool, "wisdom is remarkably open and affirming." Special attention is given to the church's mission to HIV/AIDS affected people, based on the teachings in the Old Testament, since "God's mission is the eradication of everything that attacks every dimension of human life" (439).

At the end of the book, the author reserves room to discuss the nations. He notices that the nations are always present in the biblical story, sometimes being the focus of God's attention, other times being in the background. However, he believes that the nations appear only after the flood. Wright takes the book of Jonah as an example of God extending his forgiveness and mercy to the nations. The emphasis is on God, the greatest missionary, and on his character. He concludes that "God's mission is to bless all the nations of the earth. . . . There is no favoritism in God's dealings with Israel and the nations" (462).

It is interesting to note that the author applies the covenant to the nations as a two-way relationship: you are mine, I am your God. The other nations simply belong to God, but they don't know God. There is no covenant reciprocity involved. But how did the magi find out about Messiah? Did they know God? What about Melchizedek? What about Job and his friends? Wright does not

answer such questions. Instead, he claims that God did not manifest his wrath on Israel because the nations watched and God wanted to preserve his reputation. This raises more questions about God and his character. Is God sweeping the dirt under the rug? Has Israel not already shamed God by what they have done? Are not the nations aware of Israel's misdeeds? Would God present such an unbalanced picture about himself? Should we read the OT with cheap grace lenses? Wright acknowledges that what the prophets said about God's name being dishonored in front of the nations, and their mocking of him, is a problem. However, the prophets were part of Israel. The punishment of Israel was a clear demonstration that God is not like other gods who can be manipulated by people. God is in charge.

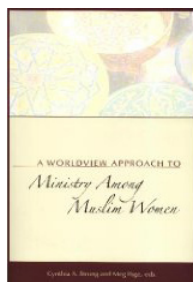
The author expects both Israel and the nations to worship and obey YHWH as a response to his blessings. But Israel's praises for blessing had a missional edge. It is impossible to not see that missional praises imply centrifugal mission. Wright's statement that Israel's mission was only centripetal stands under scrutiny. He prefers to think that the way Israel is supposed to fulfill its duty "remains a mystery" (478). He believes that in the end, the nations will share Israel's identity, while ethnic and geographic boundaries will be removed. The name "Israel" will be redefined and people would belong to YHWH only if they join Israel.

Comparing Israel's mission to the nations with the Church's, Wright concludes that "the centrifugal dynamic of the early Christian missionary movement . . . was indeed something remarkably new in practice if not in concept. . . . It seems to me that there is no clear mandate in God's revelation to Israel over the

centuries for them to undertake 'missions,' in our sense of the word, to the nations" (502, 503). Any centrifugal mission instance in the Old Testament is declared "eschatological." For Wright, Israel was simply supposed to be, not to go anywhere.

In spite of the presuppositions with which Wright approaches the study of mission in the Old Testament, *The mission of God* stands as one of the best and detailed works on the topic. It offers both a synchronic and a diachronic view of the Old Testament. The book might not be an easy read for laypeople, but it is highly recommended for scholars and seminary students, as well as for those who would like to do an in-depth study of mission in the Old Testament. And certainly, field missionaries will discover a way to read and interpret the Bible in order to fully justify their missionary mandate.

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